New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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1957 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1956 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Apple Cart (The)	258
*Auntie Mame	229
*Bells Are Ringing	182
Candide	176
Girls of Summer	197
Good Woman of Setzuan (The)	161
*Happiest Millionaire (The)	193
*Happy Hunting	166
*Li'l Abner	202
*Long Day's Journey Into Night	217
Macbeth	237
*Major Barbara	233
*Middle of the Night	370
Mr. Wonderful	339
*Most Happy Fella (The)	308
*My Fair Lady	345
Reluctant Debutante (The)	269
Richard II	253
Romeo and Juliet	250
Saint Joan	285
*Separate Tables	246
Speaking of Murder	157
Troilus and Cressida	149
*Uncle Willie	154

•

1955 Vol.

*Damn Yankees	310
*Diary of Anne Frank (The)	257
*Inherit the Wind	322
Matchmaker (The)	194
*No Time for Sergeants	238

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of March 25, 1957*

1957 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1957

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Adieux (Les)	337
Chien du Jardinier (Le)	337
Christophe Colomb	369
Clearing in the Woods (A)	393
*Duchess of Malfi (The)	313
Eugenia	366
Feu la Mere de Madame	351
Good as Gold	321
Hidden River (The)	378
*Hole in the Head (A)	330
*Holiday for Lovers	342
Intermezzo	345
Measure for Measure	381
Misanthrope (Le)	359
Nuits de la Colere (Les)	351
*Orpheus Descending	310
*Potting Shed (The)	372
Sin of Pat Muldoon (The)	318
Small War on Murray Hill	397
Taming of the Shrew (The)	334
*Tunnel of Love (The)	347
*Visit to a Small Planet (A)	356
Volpone	361
Waiting for Godot	385
*Waltz of the Toreadors (The)	390
*Ziegfeld Follies	327

Theatre Openings

"Orpheus Descending"

"The Duchess of Malfi"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of March 25, 1957*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Orpheus Descending"

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

March 22, 1957

'Orpheus Descending' Has Fiery Scenes and Acting, but It Misses

By JOHN CHAPMAN

No playwright could ask for better treatment than Tennessee Williams got from the Producers Theatre at the Martin Beck last evening. Here, in "Orpheus Descending," was a splendid cast, and back of the cast was a director who brought fire wherever fire could be struck, which was often. Yet the play is an oddly fragmentary affair which never quite comes to grips with itself. It is more like random samples of all Williams' dramas and all his characters than it is a theatrical work with a satisfying singleness of purpose.

There is a great deal of beauty in "Orpheus Descending"—the beauty of writing and the beauty of compassion; but there also is a great deal of obvious trash. One is never certain what Williams is driving at, or where he hopes he is going. The ending, which is on a shrill note of melodrama, seems to be a matter of expediency rather than a logical and inevitable conclusion which a playgoer has a right to expect from a serious work. The curtain falls on a scene of brutality and disillusionment because Williams hasn't been able to think of a better way out of the mess he has created for himself.

Stapleton Superb

The setting is a general store and soda-parlor in a small southern town. Here come all the village characters, ranging from a lady who has religious fits to a harmless old conjur man. The store is operated by Maureen Stapleton, and here Miss Stapleton comes to grips with life in most of its phases. Hers is a superb performance of the widest possible variety—cheerful, funny, pathetic, dramatic and tragic in turn. It is so skillfully done that there is no evidence of the gear-shifting such a performance demands of a player.

Among those who come into the store is a Tennessee Williams character we have met before, even in plays by William Inge—the footloose and sexually attractive young vagrant. This fellow is very well played by Cliff Robertson.

Staged by Clurman

There are many others, mostly like Williams characters we have met before. Lois Smith does a nicely theatrical job as a well-born, well-heeled and highly neurotic nymph. There is solid strength in Graham Denton's playing of Miss Stapleton's brutish but dying husband, and at least a half dozen minor characters are colorfully played.

The director, Harold Clurman, has done an exceptional job of trying to give unity to a sprawling play of mercurial moods. But I think it has baffled him, as it has me.

We can take it for granted that author Williams has a certain compassion for the human race, and an often poetic realization of the lonely, lonely road that each member of this race must travel. But "Orpheus Descending" lacks discipline; its author seems never to know if he has written a beautiful scene or a cheap one, and this weakness of judgment keeps the play from being the fine one it might have been.

"ORPHEUS DESCENDING"

Play in three acts and seven scenes by Tennessee Williams; staged by Harold Clurman; designed by Boris Aronson; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; lighting by Feder; produced by Robert Whitehead; presented by the Producers Theatre at the Martin Beck Theatre, March 21, 1957. The cast:

Dolly Hamma....Elizabeth Eustis
Beulah Binnings.....Jane Rose
Pee Wee Binnings.....
Warren Kemmerling
Dog Hamma.....David Clarke
Carol Cutrere.....Lois Smith
Eva Temple.....Nell Harrison
Sister Temple.....Mary Farrell
Uncle Pleasant...John Marriott
Val Xavier.....Cliff Robertson
Vee Talbot.....Joanna Roos
Lady Torrance..Maureen Stapleton
Jabe Torrance...Crahan Denton
Sheriff Talbot...R. G. Armstrong
Mr. Dubinsky.....Beau Tilden
Woman.....Janice Mars
David Cutrere...Robert Webber
Nurse Porter.....Virgilia Chew
First Man.....Albert Henderson
Second Man.....Charles Tyner

The New York Times

March 22, 1957

Theatre: Rural Orpheus

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SINCE he is a genuine writer, Tennessee Williams creates his worlds out of words. The newest one is called "Orpheus Descending," which opened at the Martin Beck last evening.

Although the setting is still in the South, this one is less baleful than some of the worlds he has put together recently. It is the story of a woman storekeeper and a handsome, guileless youth who comes in off the highway. A guitar-player, he is a rural Orpheus who descends to rescue his love—not in Hades, precisely, but amid the intrigue, gossip and violence of a hot-tempered town.

•

In its original form this play was "Battle of Angels," which closed amid the bedlam of scandal in Boston in 1940. Whatever offended playgoers then must have been purged in the rewriting. For "Orpheus Descending" is one of Mr. Williams' pleasantest plays, with characters determined to free themselves from corruption, with some sensitive philosophical comments in passing about the loneliness of the human being condemned in his soul to solitary confinement for the whole of his life. Mr. Williams is in a more humane state of mind than he has been in several years.

But the rewriting is not a thorough success. "Orpheus Descending" is a loosely woven play—overwritten in some of the scenes, uncertain at times in its progressions. Mr. Williams' style of writing elliptically is a fundamental part of his gift. He does not attack his scenes head-on. They grow out of improvisations. But it seems to this playgoer that Mr. Williams has his story less thoroughly under control this time, and his allusive style has a less sturdy foundation. The purple patches that explode magnificently in his best work sprawl and crumple when they are not soundly motivated.

•

What we are left with is a discursive tale with an attractive locale, a sense of small-town realities, some original characters and several wonderful scenes. The introduction of the musical vagabond to the friendless woman who keeps the store, their humorous talk, their serious talk, the simplicity of their liaison after they have come to know each other—all this Mr. Williams has written in his best style of mood, lyricism and tenderness.

And these are the scenes that act most beautifully, inside Boris Aronson's lovely open-work setting that captures both the poetry and the realism of the script. As usual Mr. Williams has put his collaborators on their toes. Harold Clurman has staged the script with affectionate devotion to its tones and half-tones.

As the storekeeper Maureen Stapleton gives a remarkable performance that has all the strength, the honesty and the power of her best work. As the vagabond with dreams Cliff Robertson is superb—handsome, manly, modest and clear. Although the script flies off at tangents frequently, Miss Stapleton and Mr. Robertson always keep their parts in focus.

Lois Smith gives a stunning performance as a high-strung, reckless "lewd vagrant," as she calls herself. And the long cast includes some excellent acting by Joanna Roos, Robert Webber, Jane Rose, Crahan Denton, Elizabeth Eustis and others who should have a word of recognition if there were time.

Again, Mr. Williams' magic style of writing and his instinct for theatre have created a world that is entirely his own. There are streaks of his special genius all through "Orpheus Descending." But this time he has not ordered his world as decisively as usual. Orpheus is not always sure of his direction.

Daily Mirror

March 22, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Williams 'Orpheus' Not for Squeamish

• This harrowing dip into Hades is sure box-office click.

When Tennessee Williams, maestro of the morbid, penned "Orpheus Descending" some years ago, he could still laugh a little. But his laughter was cynical and bitter. Even then, Williams was obsessed by the abnormal, by the frustrated, seeking for understanding and adjustment in a world that seemed mad to them.

Williams took as his text in this instance an excerpt from a letter that the dour August Strindberg wrote to the eccentric Paul Gauguin: "I, too, am beginning to feel an immense need to become a savage and create a new world." The dramatist has taken an oblique approach to the problem.

HE HAS IMAGINED a town in the South inhabited by the sadistic and insane. There isn't a sound apple in the barrel. All are rotten to the core. An itinerant Elvis Presley with a good physique, a prized guitar and a jacket of rattlesnake skins, wanders into the lunatic village and takes a job as handyman in the general store.

A pasty-faced exhibitionist whose queer didos have won her local ostracism warns him, with voice of a Cassandra, that he is doomed unless he flees. This nymphomaniac offers to give him a lift across the county line in her car for favors to be received. But, as usual, Cassandra's warnings go without heed.

Orpheus makes a start or two at hitting the road, but is held back by the sex-starved mistress of the shoddy mercantile mart. So, when her elderly, dying husband suspects the worst, he shoots the wife. And the peripatetic musician is torn to bits by the sheriff's bloodhounds.

Talk about "The Duchess of Malfi." Williams makes Webster look like a mere amateur at depicting terror and torture, lunacy and lust. He really pulls out all the stops, with, be it reported hypnotic results. The first-nighters sat spellbound throughout the harrowing dip into Hades.

HAROLD CLURMAN has staged this dance of death with a sure hand.

Maureen Stapleton gives an arresting performance of the warm-blooded, hate-ridden wife who learns that her vicious husband has helped to murder her father. Cliff Robertson has brought a goodly measure of illumination to the ill-defined role of the backwoods Segovia who lets himself be trapped into lingering too long in Williams' Southern snakepit by a crossroads Lorelei.

Joanna Roos, Grahan Denton, Jane Rose, Elizabeth Eustis and Robert Webber interpret other pathetic and malignant growths in this corrupt and debased community.

"ORPHEUS DESCENDING," an exploration into the depths of depravity, should turn the Martin Beck into a veritable mint for Producers' Theatre. It may also turn the stomachs of the squeamish. But Williams' brutal rhythms exert the fascination of a cobra for playgoers. Like him or not, he spells BOX-OFFICE in capital letters. He has another hit.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 22, 1957

Tennessee Williams Loses Round Two of His Battle

By TOM DONNELLY.

In the light of its history, it is supremely ironic that Tennessee Williams "Orpheus Descending" (at the Martin Beck) is the least characteristic of the author's plays, and communicates virtually no sense of an artist's personal vision.

An earlier version of the piece, called "Battle of Angels," was produced with disastrous results in Boston in 1940, and we are given to understand that Mr. Williams has been working on it, more or less intermittently, in the years since.

The characters in "Orpheus Descending," and most of the plot ingredients, seem to have come out of the hopper where bits and pieces of theatrical cardboard are kept. The scene is a general store in a small Southern town, and the heroine is unhappily married to a man who is not only a vicious human being, but a dying one. Into the store one day steps a handsome young guitar player, very open at the throat.

Lugubrious Route.

Well, the inevitable happens, and the play ends as the lady, who is pregnant by her lover, is shot by the husband, and the lover is destroyed by a howling mob. Wow!

How does Mr. Williams get from here to there? By a very strange and lugubrious route, I'm afraid. There are of course exceptions, but in most of the plays that we admire, like "A Streetcar Named Desire," the central characters struggle towards comprehensible goals, and we follow their struggles with sympathetic interest. The people in "Orpheus Descending" mill aimlessly about in a swamp of misery.

There are outbursts of violence, minor figures move importantly into the spotlight, but turn out to have no particular reason for being there, and Mr. Williams applies all sorts of dubious glues and cements to hold his melodramatic inventions together.

Villains appear and indulge in various deviltries without any dramatically comprehensible motivation. Crises are precipitated when vital bits of information are more or less implausibly withheld.

Merely a Prop.

At one point the husband admits to the wife that he has assisted in the murder of her father. The patient's nurse betrays absolutely no interest whatever in this fascinating bit of information, and yet, a few moments later, this sphinx is hotly denouncing the heroine's immorality.

Now there might be ways of justifying the behavior of this Florence Nightingale, but Mr. Williams is simply using her as a prop. I mention this small circumstance only because Mr. Williams handles his major characters in very much the same arbitrary fashion. The wife, upon discovering that she is to have a child, easily dismisses the lover she has been hanging onto for dear life but an instant before, and we are apparently expected to believe that it is the achievement of maternity she has had on her mind all along. There have been very few hints of this, and the matter is not satisfactorily resolved by having her make a speech about an unexpected miracle.

To be sure, Mr. Williams is probably incapable of writing a hopelessly dull play, and "Orpheus Descending" has its brief lightning flashes and its flares of intensity. But it is impossible to accept the characters as real people, or to care very much what happens to them. Even the passages which treat, in a more or less philosophical way, of the world as a kind of solitary confinement cell do not sound like Tennessee Williams being pessimistic, with one man's anguish at the corruption everywhere visible. They suggest the handiwork of the average Gloomy Gus.

In any case, "Orpheus Descending" has been sensitively staged by Harold Clurman, and the acting is excellent. Maureen Stapleton is, within the limits set by the author, superb as the bedevilled heroine. Cliff Robertson is warm and appealing as the guitar player, and Lois Smith, done up in a white make-up like a Kabuki dancer, does nobly by the tedious and irrelevant role of one of those lunatic Dixie belles.

New York Post

March 22, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

The World of Tennessee Williams

"Orpheus Descending," which opened last night at the Martin Beck Theater, is another searing look at the dark and tormented world of Tennessee Williams. In the characteristic mood of its author, it is steeped in passion, hatred, frustration, bitterness and violence, and it ends in a welter of blood and death worthy of one of the Elizabethan tragedies. It abounds in tension, blackness of spirit, and the deep sadness of misunderstood loneliness. And, splendidly acted and staged, it is a drama of notable power, grim poetic insight and disturbing fascination.

More than most of Mr. Williams' plays, it contemplates not only the personal tragedies of a few frustrated misfits, but also the ugly tensions, hatreds, jealousies and narrow-minded stupidities of an entire backwoods Southern community. There are loathsome people in it who could well serve as melodramatic villains, but the actual villain is the petty and spiteful atmosphere of this small unnamed town, and the air of doom that hangs over the drama is an almost impersonal kind of vindictiveness which the playwright sets down with bitter understanding.

Central Figures

The people in whom "Orpheus Descending" is centrally interested, though, are the lost and embittered daughter of an Italian immigrant, a woman tormented by the knowledge that some of the customers who come to her store had been in the masked mob that had murdered her father, and a wild and imaginative young vagrant, who is looking for an unaccustomed peace and quiet and finds only destruction. It is their dual tragedy that provides the narrative, and their doom comes in an outburst of violence which provides one of the author's most harrowing endings.

They are not, however, the only characters studied with the sort of gloomy compassion which Mr. Williams presents in his capacity as brooding, dramatic poet of evil. There is, for one, the girl prostitute of "good" family, whose preoccupation with sex is the tortured reaction from one-time social idealism. For another, there is the half-crazed wife of the sheriff, who is looking for release from memories of her husband's sadistic official activities. As an expert in pity and terror, the playwright makes both of them memorable figures.

Power and Passion

Possibly because it is concerned with the depiction of an entire community, "Orpheus Descending" seems a little more scattered in its drama than is usually the case with Mr. Williams. That ending in blood and death is perhaps a bit too precipitous to be completely effective. But the power, the passion and the violent credibility are there, and so is that remarkable gift for being darkly lyric in the midst of terror and hatred. There are occasions, too, when a wry and embittered humor emerges with unexpected force in the center of the unrelieved gloom.

Harold Clurman's staging and Boris Aronson's set capture the play's mood admirably. And the performances are brilliant. Maureen Stapleton again proves what a splendid actress she is as the doomed woman, and Cliff Robertson seems just right as the young, music-loving vagrant. Lois Smith is deeply moving as the young prostitute, while Joanna Roos as the sheriff's wife, and Crahan Denton, as the heroine's dying but still homicidal husband, are particularly effective. The black and brooding spirit of Tennessee Williams is once more fascinatingly dramatized.

Journal-American

March 22, 1957

'Orpheus' Raises Williams' Stature

By JOHN McCLAIN

IN "Orpheus Descending" which opened at the Martin Beck Theatre last night, Tennessee Williams is back in our midst with his menagerie of decadent Southern folk. Dogs from the chain gang devour unclad fugitives, an old Indian sells fresh animal skulls, an Italian immigrant's homestead is burned down by the vigilantes and the old man loses his life in the fire, a young belle, having lost her fight for non-segregation, is now devoting herself to juke-crawling and back-seat romancing with any new face that appears in the county.

These are only a few of the charming people one encounters in this new Williams play and it seems almost unbelievable that they can be made persuasive and valid enough to hold an audience for an evening. Yet, because of the power and the brilliance and the humor of his writing, it emerges as a consistently moving and captivating experience.

Fascinated by Characters

With one or two exceptions all the characters in the drama would cause any one of us to bolt the door at the mere news that they had crossed the George Washington bridge. We wouldn't wish to spend an evening with them in the flesh, but we cannot help being fascinated with them, just as one might linger overlong at the cobra cage in the zoo. For the author has done a masterful job of getting inside their characters and making us feel that, however repellent, we understand their motives.

Although the plot of this play is some 15 years old, it bears strong overtones of "The Rainmaker," and even "Picnic," both more recent. It is the story, simply, of what happens when a young man of charm and poetic imagination invades a small community.

In this case the town is in Mississippi; the young man is, as always, a charming itinerant with a questionable past; the girl is the proprietor of a merchandise shop, with a dying husband she married for convenience.

Then there is the dissolute young beauty who unsuccessfully hurls herself at him, a posse of town gossips and frustrated wives, the unrelenting sheriff, his unraveling wife, and similar operatives.

Good Taste

This is strong stuff, at times, but it didn't affect me as some of Williams' earlier efforts have. If a joke is slightly risque, it is funny enough to justify it; sex is not dragged in by the heels or beaten to death with a club; the entire proceedings are in adult good taste. It is as though the author had matured mightily since his excursion on the Hot Tin Roof.

Maureen Stapleton, who has had almost steady employment in the Williams troupe lately, here gives her most demanding performance.

Nobody can play the tormented and desirous low-caste Southerner with such fierceness and conviction. She is given enormous help by Cliff Robertson, a most prepossessing young actor, who handles the role of the migrant charmer with assurance and vigor.

Other fine contributions are offered by Lois Smith, as the dissolute deb; Elizabeth Eustis and Jane Rose, as a couple of town criers; Joanna Roos, as the visionary sheriff's wife; R. G. Armstrong, as the sheriff, and Crahan Denton, as Miss Stapleton's declining mate.

Harold Clurman has done a forceful and skilled job of direction, and Boris Aaronson's single set is realistic enough to cause almost active illness.

"Orpheus Descending" is not for the young or the squeamish—these are not the people for whom Mr. Williams writes. But it is searing and always compelling; it reinstates the author's position in the modern theatre.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
March 22, 1957

THEATER

'Orpheus Descending'

By WALTER KERR

"NOBODY ever gets to know nobody," says the strolling guitar-player with the snakeskin jacket in Tennessee Williams' "Orpheus Descending." He thinks a moment and adds that every one of us is under "lifetime sentence to solitary confinement inside our own skins as long as we're on this earth." He recalls a time when he sat lonely on a bayou, thinking about these things and waiting for an answer, for the final clarity everybody waits for. And it was then he realized that most people settle for make-believe answers —love among them.

Well, "Orpheus Descending" seems to me a make-believe play. Since Tennessee Williams wrote it, it has passages of earthy humor, passages of effective violence, and passages in which quick little human inflections that are utterly true sing suddenly above the babble.

* * *

When Maureen Stapleton, as a woman who has been handed over to her ailing husband in a "fire sale," apologizes and hurls out an epithet in the same running breath, when her eyes blaze with the vision of the new confectionery she is going to add to her dry-goods store, when she fumbles in embarrassment over the proposition she is making to the young wanderer who works for her, the shadow of a genuine human being begins to rise on the stage. Miss Stapleton's fiercely intelligent eyes always carry conviction; you're sure that she does know and feel everything the author says she knows and feels.

When director Harold Clurman sets pasty-faced Lois Smith, a rebel who's been on a defiant juke-box party since she was fifteen, to curling her fingers into claws and spitting out her curiously joyless creed, or when he drags crippled Crahan Denton down a flight of stairs to admit to his imprisoned wife that he helped kill her father, the face of cruelty leaps into bold and savage relief. Against these despairing members of a society "sick with neon" Cliff Robertson's soft-spoken troubadour—strong enough in his own idealism to rise above the corruption that dogs his heels—is quiet, effective contrast.

But the passions that rise and swell, almost one to a scene and helpfully on cue, seem to stem from no underground lava-bed. They are postures, devices, excuses for handsome big scenes. If there is quick excitement in the spectacle of Mr. Robertson dancing crazily all over a counter to avoid the switchblades that slash at his feet, there is no real cause for the intolerance that has brought these fanatics into the store. (Mr. Robertson has simply been nice to old ladies, and been misunderstood; it patently isn't enough). And when there is a pitched battle between lovers Robertson and Stapleton over the matter of gettting out of town, Mr. Robertson's failure to tell the truth is an expedient one; it keeps the scene going, but it drains him of such character as he seems to have had.

* * *

Indeed, I think there is an essential artifice at the very heart of this reworking of Mr. William's first-produced play, "Battle of Angels." The boy who comes into town—like a bird with no feet to land on, a bird who simply sleeps on the wind—seems to me genuinely without feet on which to walk the earth, without that touch of clay that makes men common. He is, basically a romantic convention, an innocent who has no flesh-and-blood existence—and the fact that he is eventually torn to pieces by the somewhat more 'real' denizens of the community cannot excite our pity.

* * *

This lesion in the reality of the work leads Mr. Williams into excesses of language that one does not expect of him. Apart from the "nobody ever gets to know nobody" sort of philosophical exercise, he permits his characters to talk about the "sweetness we (Americans) used to have for each other," about how a guitar "washes me clean like water whenever I feel dirty," and he finally has one of them rip right open into declamation on the order of "my body has burst into flower."

A first-rate artist has, in short, permitted himself the luxury of sentimental invention rather than bound himself by the rigors of controlled, hard-headed observation. There is a serious loss in sustained power.

"The Duchess of Malfi"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun
March 20, 1957

The Blood Comes Up Like Thunder

By TOM DONNELLY.

They have done a lot to obscure the hideous beauties of "The Duchess of Malfi" in the production at the Phoenix, but this horror classic is too strong for them. It persists in making itself felt.

The program says, quite properly: "'The Duchess of Malfi,' an Elizabethan thriller by John Webster."

Elizabethan it assuredly is, so why has the management decided to do it up in those psuedo-Edwardian trappings which have been all the rage this season? This particular conceit worked well enough in the cases of "Measure for Measure" and "Troilus and Cressida," but it takes approximately 50 percent off the edge of Webster's tragedy, particularly in the preliminary scenes.

An Odd Beginning.

The curtain goes up, and presently the stage is encrusted with gentlemen in leather boots and glittering uniforms, and ladies attired in stylish evening gowns that suggest a mixture of Aubrey Beardsley, Jean Cocteau, Lady Windermere's Fan, Marlene Dietrich and Vogue.

Well, "The Duchess of Malfi" is not about court intrigue in old Vienna, an impression that is reinforced at the Phoenix by the decor, some of the actors, and the fact that Webster does not offer us a massacre in the course of the first five minutes.

No, at the start things are relatively genteel, with only casual references to corruption, death, and lechery, and gossip about a fine fellow who has committed "a notorious murder" at the instigation of one of the duchess' brothers, and has been grossly underpaid for it. The killer feels peevish at his neglect. "This foul melancholy will poison all his goodness," someone says kindly.

The Plot Quickens.

Presently the pace begins to

"THE DUCHESS OF MALFI"

Play in two acts by John Webster; staged and designed by Jack Landau; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; costumes by Saul Bolasni; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton in association with John Houseman at the Phoenix Theatre, March 19, 1957. The cast:

Antonio.....Earle Hyman
Delio.....Richard Easton
Bosola.....Pernell Roberts
Cardinal.....Hurd Hatfield
Ferdinand.....Joseph Wiseman
Roderigo.....Louis Edmonds
Castruccio.....Justice Watson
Silvio.....Charles Macaulay
Pescara.....Patrick Hines
Grisolan.....William Cottrell
Duchess of Malfi.....Jacqueline Brookes
Cariola.....Priscilla Morrill
An Old Woman...Dorothy Patten
Julia.....Jan Farrand
A Doctor.....Ellis Rabb
A Footman.....Mitchell Agruss

"The Duchess of Malfi"—*continued*

quicken. The duchess, who is no snob, marries her steward in an informal ceremony, and is hard put to it to keep the news from her brothers, one a cardinal, and the other a duke. In no time at all the duchess learns that she is surrounded by villains, of a raging ferocity that makes the truants in the works of Mickey Spillane seem like gentle philanthropists.

The play races along a route richly marked by homicide, infanticide, treachery, torture and all manner of towering abominations.

It is possible that the duchess suffers more indignities than any other heroine of literature. There is, for example, the moment when the duke tells her that he has come to seal his peace with her, and that she may kiss his hand there in the friendly dark.

The duchess obliges, and then discovers that she has been given a severed human hand to salute. The lights flare up, and there she sees what appears to be the murdered figure of her husband. It is only a wax dummy but, never fear, the steward will join dozens of others in the tomb before very long.

Rich and Bawdy.

"The Duchess of Malfi" is certainly not an uplifting tragedy, and it does not shake the soul. It is a magnificent orchestration of violence and revenge, and it shakes the spine. The language is bawdy, flaring, studded with baleful jewels, rich in gruesome majesty.

The duchess tells a villain that she could curse the stars. He replies: "Look you, the stars shine still." She answers: "O, but you must remember, my curse hath a great way to go. . . ."

The grandest Grand Guignol of them all, that's "The Duchess."

Under the direction of Jack Landau, the actors at the Phoenix just manage to get by. Earle Hyman is fumbling as the steward, and Joseph Wiseman mumbles as the duke. Jacqueline Brookes gains in confidence as the piece progresses, and does the duchess' final scenes commendably. Hurd Hatfield is fair as the cardinal, and Jan Ferrand and Pernell Roberts are OK as a couple of busy sinners.

My feeling is that even a faltering "duchess" is better than no "duchess" at all.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
March 20, 1957

THEATER

'The Duchess of Malfi'

By WALTER KERR

IN CASE you haven't had a really satisfactory evening's entertainment since you first read "Dracula," the Phoenix Theater is the place for you. Blood runs right over the footlights, spreads slowly up the aisles and spills well out onto Second Ave.

Before going any farther, I had better say that I had an absolutely wonderful time. With that out of the way, we can go on to detail some of the more refined delights of the occasion. John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi" is, among other things, the Elizabethan play that made "King Lear" look like a bowdlerized version of "Little Lord Fauntleroy."

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It begins, for no good reason except the endless possibility of fun and games, with the determination of two brothers that their widowed sister shall not remarry. Never have any two monsters pursued a goal with such glorious dedication.

One of them—on learning that the girl has, in fact, remarried—is prepared to entice the lass into a completely darkened room, tell her he has forgiven her and offer her her husband's hand to kiss. You've probably guessed it. When the lights go up, she's kissing her husband's hand, all right—but there isn't any arm on the end of it.

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But that's just the appetizer. Webster hasn't begun to drool yet. A few minutes later the good Duchess is being awakened in the night by the sound of madmen's voices, screaming through every room in the house. The instant she arises, gaunt hooded figures appear from the orchestra pit, ominous ropes dangling from their fists. And while one of these invaders smothers a shrieking maidservant upstage, two others wrap a coil around milady's neck and pull, pull, pull until her eyes pop. After that, a tiny infant is strangled, but it's an anticlimax.

So far we've accounted for the imaginative behavior of one brother. The other is a red-robed Cardinal, with rather large rings on his fingers. When he wishes to get rid of a mistress, he simply rubs one ring on a volume of religious meditations, orders the wench in question to kiss the book, and then has her limp, poisoned form lugged from the premises over the shoulder of an all-purpose henchman. Later on, a miscreant begins to imagine that he is a wolf, takes a headlong dive onto the floor in an effort to throttle his own shadow, and—well, I'm giving away the plot.

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What is truly remarkable about this Jack Landau staging of one of the grimmest Grand Guignols in all theatrical history is that he has been able to play it with a magnificently straight face, every muscle tense. At least eight or nine bodies go writhing down staircases before the slaughter is done, but there wasn't a titter in the house last night until Corpse Number Nine doubled up. The goblins have got you, almost all the way.

Mr. Landau has made sure that his players are serious, even when they are most insane. From all of them—from Jacqueline Brookes as the victim, Earle Hyman as her husband, Joseph Wiseman and Hurd Hatfield as principal madmen, Jan Farrand as a polite harlot, and Pernell Roberts as an executioner who worries about his work—he has drawn crisp, snarling, defiant performances. It doesn't matter for a moment whether or not you believe in these people; they simply won't let you stop listening.

And what is more remarkable still is that everyone concerned has been reasonably fair to Webster. Whatever may be said about this horror-merchant's demented plotting, he was a master of mood. With the help of Lee Hoiby's penetrating musical score and Jean Rosenthal's impressive lighting, the mood—sick, sour and honestly chilling—catches hold. The author tells us quite early that he is after the smallpox pits that lurk behind fashionable paint and powder; he insists later that he is putting a girdle around the globe in order to sound out all its quicksands. In both of these instances, he is making a plea for the validity of his dramatic nightmare. Mr. Landau and associates have listened carefully—and have just about made the plea stick.

If your nerves are strong, and if your passion for logic is not foolishly insistent, by all means go.

The New York Times

March 20, 1957

Theatre: Horror Play

'The Duchess of Malfi' Staged at Phoenix

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SINCE John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi" is a horror play, a studied production ill becomes it. Jack Landau's stage version, which opened at the Phoenix last evening, dissipates most of its raw emotion.

Two years ago Mr. Landau directed Webster's second thriller, "The White Devil," at the Phoenix. Having nothing to work with then except a few packing cases and rags, Mr. Landau arranged a performance that made treachery, corruption, violence and mayhem thoroughly enjoyable. Few people had realized that Webster was such an entertaining fellow.

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But Mr. Landau's "The Duchess of Malfi" production is carefully planned. Using Rouben Ter-Arutunian's festival stage as background, Mr. Landau has added two flights of steps, a balcony and ornamental lamps. The stage composition is original and striking. Although "The Duchess of Malfi" dates from 1614, Saul Bolasni has dressed the actors in costumes that are vaguely modern.

But this approach to an Elizabethan drama does not work successfully in the current instance. It diffuses a play that does not have much of a theme or coherent story. It is elaborate, formal and contrived. Cut to fit the time interval of the modern theatre, the play is in many respects unintelligible.

As a piece of writing, "The Duchess of Malfi" is not versatile enough for an artful production. It is a slam-bang job of sensationalism, permeated with spies and intrigue, saturated with murder. It would take an I. B. M. computer to count the deaths by strangling, poison and stabbing.

Webster was so much in the Shakespearean tradition that "The Duchess of Malfi" was acted in the rebuilt Globe Theatre, and Richard Burbadge, one of Shakespeare's old comrades, is supposed to have played the part of Ferdinand. Although it is theatrical, it is on a lower literary level than Shakespeare and does not respond to the same styles of producing.

Nor does the acting of Mr. Landau's company do justice to Webster's verse. All the principal male actors speak indifferently. Earle Hyman, who plays Antonio, does not find in Webster the resonant rhythms that he ordinarily discovers in Shakespeare. Pernell Roberts, as Bosola; Hurd Hatfield, as the evil Cardinal; Joseph Wiseman, as Ferdinand, run through their parts without much tonal inflection or physical excitement.

The women are somewhat better. As the unhappy Duchess, Jacqueline Brookes has a classical beauty that gives the part definition, and takes an interest in her acting. In one torrid scene in the homicidal last act Jan Farrand shows what Webster could be like if he were played boldly. She plays it with gratifying recklessness.

Perhaps the modernization of "The Duchess of Malfi" is the thing that has tamed it. In modern dress, actors cannot sweep through a drama with abandon and cannot speak verse with wildness and gusto. But "The Duchess of Malfi" without ferocity and bombast is not very interesting. If Webster is not sensational, he is nothing.

Daily Mirror

March 20, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Duchess of Malfi' Spine-Tingling Play

• Elizabethan thriller of murder and mayhem well done at Phoenix.

You'd best stop by the adjacent Vivere's for a warming dinner before catching John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi" at the Phoenix, for this Elizabethan thriller is calculated to chill you to the marrow. It's a grisly and gory business, this saga of betrayal and revenge.

The Elizabethan tragedy of blood was the forerunner of the French Grand Guignol. It aimed at giving you goose-pimples, at sending shivers up and down your spine. But the Kydds and Webster brought a depth and poetic grandeur to the horror play that the later French were never able to achieve.

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IN OUR BOOK, Webster, on the basis of "The Duchess of Malfi" and "The White Devil," ranked next to the incomparable Shakespeare among the dramatists of that era. Though Marlowe created the mighty line, Webster gave it a richness that only Stratford's favorite son could surpass.

"The Duchess of Malfi" has to do with a passionate widow who begets a child by her steward, secretly in fear of what her treacherous and greedy brothers might do. They want her inheritance, even if they have to murder to secure it. Learning of her affair, they have the hapless sister tortured and assassinated.

Their violence breeds violence. Before the evening is over, bodies are scattered about the Phoenix stage like kernels of grain tossed to the ground by a thresher. But, these terrors compounded are set forth in speech that has insight into the human heart and some of it might have been penned by **a Freudian master of the poetic** medium.

John Houseman has developed a method of making the classics seem contemporary. In association with young Jack Landau, he gave Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" added timeliness via a production that smacked of the period of Franz Josef. Now, he and Landeau are bent on turning a similar trick with "The Duchess of Malfi."

THEY HAVE MET with a goodly measure of success. Using Rouben Ter-Arutunian's venetian-blind-like background, to which has been added curving, sweeping steps, they have managed a revival notable for fluidity of movement. However, Saul Bolasni's costumes lack consistency.

The villainous executioner Bosola, etched with sinister effect by Pernell Roberts, is garbed in the leather jacket and boots of a member of the Soviet's merciless MVD. His associates in massacre, topped by storm-trooper helmets, could pass for the cruel henchmen of a Hitler. The women suggest the Empire, and the men of the court the entourage of Franz Josef. It was a bit confusing.

Jacqueline Brookes, as the ill-starred Duchess; Earle Hyman, as the steward to whom she gave her love; Hurd Hatfield and Joseph Wiseman, as her ruthless, **designing and psychopathic** brothers met their challenges with such resource as Landau permitted. Richard Easton and Jan Farrand stood out in other roles.

"The Duchess of Malfi" is not for the squeamish. If you be a candidate for the couch, it's likely to add to your costly hours thereon in some analyst's office. But if you have the gusto to take murder and mayhem in stride, a visit to the Phoenix would seem to be imperative.